

Rules of the Game

Reading Spell Descriptions (Part Six)

By Skip Williams



This week, we'll take a look at the final three entries in a spell header.

Duration

The next entry in the spell header tells you how long the spell's effects last. In general, a spell's duration begins at the time in the round when you finish the spell. Spell duration is discussed in detail on page 176 of the *Player's Handbook*. This section contains some additional notes on a few kinds of durations.

Instantaneous: A spell with an instantaneous duration lasts only for the instant that the spell is completed, though its effects can last a long time. For example, a *fireball* spell is an instantaneous spell, but the damage it deals lasts until something heals or repairs it. *Wall of stone* also is an instantaneous spell. The stone it creates appears in an instant, and after that a mass of nonmagical rock remains behind.

Because there's no magic operating after the spell takes effect, you can't dispel a spell with an instantaneous duration. The spell's effects also don't have a magical aura that you can find with *detect magic* spell (except for a lingering aura that persists for a very short time; see the *detect magic* spell description).

Recipients, Effects, and Areas: If the spell affects recipients directly, the results of the spell travel with the subjects for the spell's duration. A spell affects recipients directly when the spell has a target or targets entry or when the spell affects creatures or objects within an area rather than affecting the whole area (see the notes in the section on areas).

When a spell produces an effect, the effect lasts for the duration unless the effect is somehow destroyed first.

If the spell affects an area then the spell functions in that area for its duration. Recipients become subject to the spell when they enter the area and are no longer subject to it when they leave the area.

Touch Spells: The duration for a touch spell doesn't begin until the caster touches a subject and delivers the spell to a recipient. Attempting to touch a recipient requires a melee touch attack and that is part of the action used to cast the spell during the round when the spell is completed. If the recipient is willing to be touched, it's usually best to just assume the caster touches the recipient.

If the caster does not touch a recipient then (either because she doesn't try to or the melee touch attack fails), she must use an action (usually the attack or full attack action) to touch a recipient during a later round. This is called "holding the charge." A caster holding a charge is considered armed and can use an attack of opportunity to make a melee touch attack and deliver the spell.

Whenever the caster touches anything, the held charge is discharged, even if what the caster touches isn't a

valid target for the spell (in that case, the spell is wasted). The charge also is lost (and wasted) if the caster casts another spell. Otherwise, a caster can hold a charge indefinitely. DMs should feel free to set some reasonable limit to how long a character can hold a charge, perhaps 1 hour or until the caster has to go to sleep (or trance in the case of elves).

A very few touch spells (*water breathing*, for example) can be partially discharged. If so, this will be mentioned in the spell's target entry and its descriptive text, or both.

As a full-round action you can touch up to six friends willing creatures, object that willing creatures hold, or objects just lying round by themselves), provided that all the recipients are within the caster's reach. (The caster can extend her reach a little by taking a 5-foot step during the process.) To use this option, you must first cast the spell and hold the charge. Because the recipients are willing, no melee touch attack is required. You must decide how to distribute the spell's effect before touching anything.

Saving Throw

The second to last entry in the spell header tells you whether the spell's recipient or recipients are allowed saving throws against the spell's effects. This is an important piece of information because most descriptive text for spells is written with the assumption that the recipient's saving throw (if one is allowed) fails. For example, the text for *charm person* says the spell makes a humanoid regard you as an ally. It doesn't bother to mention the possibility of a successful saving throw because you are assumed to read the spell header and know that a saving throw is allowed (in this case Will negates, see below).

When a spell allows a saving throw, the entry begins with the kind of saving throw the recipient can attempt (Reflex, Fortitude, or Will). Types of saving throw entries include the following:

Negates: The spell has no effect on a recipient who makes a successful saving throw.

If the spell has no obvious physical effects (and most spells that allow saves to negate don't), a recipient that makes a successful saving throw still feels an obviously hostile force or tingle. If the spell has a target or targets entry, the caster knows that the spell has failed.

A recipient who makes a successful saving throw doesn't know where the spell came from (though that might be obvious if the caster is visible) or what the spell was. If the spell has a target or targets entry, however, a recipient that makes a successful saving throw can attempt a Spellcraft check (DC 25 plus the spell level) to determine what the spell was. This does not take an action, and the recipient cannot retry the check if it fails.

Charm person is a good example of this kind of spell.

Partial: The spell causes an effect on its subject. A successful saving throw means that some lesser effect occurs. The descriptive text in the spell covers both the full and partial effect.

Entangle is a good example of this kind of spell.

Half: The spell deals damage, and a successful saving throw halves the damage of the recipient (round down). If the save allowed is a Reflex save, a recipient with the evasion class feature takes no damage on a successful saving throw. If the save allowed is a Reflex save, a recipient with the improved evasion class feature takes half

damage even on a failed save and no damage on a successful saving throw (provided that the recipient isn't helpless).

Fireball is a good example of this kind of spell.

None: No saving throw is allowed (and enough said).

Disbelief: A successful save lets a creature ignore the effect. Spells that allow this kind of saving throw usually are from the illusion school, and they usually don't have any direct effects on creatures or objects, but instead have effect or area entries. Creatures make their disbelief saves upon interacting with the area or effect in some fashion. The rules don't give any guidelines on what kind of interaction is required. As a rule of thumb, a creature interacts with something upon attacking it, studying it, touching it, talking to it, or doing something else that one might do with a real creature or object. Merely looking at something usually doesn't qualify as interaction, but using an action (standard or full-round) to study or identify it does. Sometimes a disbelief save is automatic, such as when a character tries to touch an illusory wall and his hand passes right through it (see page 173 in the *Player's Handbook* for details).

Silent image is a good example of this kind of spell.

Object: When a saving throw entry ends with this notation, it indicates that the spell can be aimed at an object (most spells that have this notation have a target entry). A reminder is in order here -- these spells don't necessarily only affect objects (though some do).

An object that receives the spell gets a saving throw only if it is magical or if a creature wears or carries the object. See page 177 in the *Player's Handbook* for details.

Undetectable alignment is a good example of this kind of spell.

Harmless: When a saving throw entry ends with this notation, it indicates that the spell usually is beneficial, not harmful. The recipient can attempt a saving throw if it desires.

Darkvision is a good example of this kind of spell.

Spell Resistance

The final entry in the spell header tells you if the spell must overcome spell resistance (if any) to affect the recipient. If the entry is "no" then the spell most likely does not affect the recipient directly, but instead either affects an area or produces an effect which then produces the spell's result. Most spells that work only on willing creatures also have a spell resistance entry of "no" because it is assumed that a willing creature lowers its spell resistance before receiving the spell.

If the spell entry is "yes," the spell usually goes to work directly on the recipient's mind or body and the caster must make a level check to overcome spell resistance before the spell can affect the creature.

What's Next?

Next week, we'll consider a spell's descriptive text and wind up our look into spells with a few notes about spell chains.

About the Author

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